

A Truth Beyond Knowledge...

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“Life without love is like a tree without blossoms or fruit.”

“Love has no other desire but to fulfil itself. To melt and be like a running brook that sings its melody to the night. To wake at dawn with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving...”

Kahlil Gibran, the Prophet



Chapter One: The Gift of Love



Catherine moved slowly around her balcony, lighting many candles. The hour was late, but she was dressed for the evening in a long ivory and lace evening dress.

Tonight was a special occasion, and an evening for celebration. And she intended to enjoy it to the fullest.

She had taken the following day off work. She knew she would not go to bed until dawn. Joe had been understanding, if a little annoyed.

She shrugged. *It couldn't be helped.*

Moving to a teacart, she began lighting more candles. Everywhere, shimmering lights sparkled and gleamed. She smiled gently with satisfaction. It was truly going to be a magical night...

Shaking out the long match, she paused, hearing a rustling sound behind her. Turning, she found Vincent standing silently, at the far end of the balcony.

Catherine admired the picture he made, outlined and illuminated by light. He too, was dressed for the evening, in his white ruffled shirt and dark vest, beneath his cloak. Her heart skipped a beat, and then picked up, in anticipation.

She smiled at him. "It was a year ago, tonight."

Vincent acknowledged her words with a sigh. "How remarkable you are, remembering such a dark moment with dancing light." He extended his hands to encompass the show of burning candlelight.

Catherine nodded, as she walked slowly toward him. "It's a time for celebration. I found hope again, that night. I found you."

Vincent watched her approach. She came close to him, standing before him and looking up into his face.

He inhaled deeply. On the cool night air, he could detect the scent she wore. It always said to him, *Catherine*...

No matter where he was, the memory of that soft, floral scent always brought her back to him. He would always know it was her, even on the darkest night. And what a dark night it had been, last April 12th.

How his life had changed...

Is it really only a year, since we first met? I could not begin to imagine my life, without you in it...

She meant everything to him. He never wanted the moment to end, or the spell to be broken. But he had a gift for her, and he wanted her to see it.

"I have something for you. I wanted to give you something from my world. Something for you to carry with you. A keepsake."

He drew it from his vest pocket, and held up the crystal he'd previously shown to Mouse. The crystal hung suspended on a gold chain, and sparkled in the candlelight.

Catherine stared at it, entranced. "Vincent, it's beautiful..." she whispered.

Vincent nodded. "It comes from our deepest chamber. It reminds me of a piece of eternity."

He twined the chain around his fingertips before lifting it over Catherine's head, and allowing the crystal to settle against the bodice of her ivory dress, resting in the shadowed hollow beneath the base of her throat.

He caught his breath, as he tried, and failed, not to be jealous of the sparkling gem, as it nestled there.

Catherine glanced down. "I'll cherish it..."

She looked back up and smiled. She reached to pick up the leather pouch she had sewn earlier. "I wanted you to have a part of me to hold close. When I was little, I was terrified of the dark. And I used to have an awful time falling asleep."

She dipped into the pouch, and drew out a small, pure white, ivory rose. She showed it to him.

"My mother gave me this rose. She told me that whenever I got frightened, to hold the rose and to think of her. And to know that wherever she was, she was thinking of me. It helped me to go to sleep."

She took Vincent's hands, and placed the pouch within his palms. "Until you came into my life, Vincent, I'd forgotten how it felt to know there was someone thinking of me. Someone who knows who I am."

She went up onto tiptoe, and reached to place the leather thong around his neck. "Someone I'm connected to."

Vincent gazed down at her. "Every moment since that night, I'm reminded of what a gift life is."

Catherine sighed her agreement as she moved closer to him and placed her head on his shoulder. She nestled deeper, as Vincent enclosed her in a warm embrace.

They stood for some time, not speaking. Then Catherine drew back, and took both his hands in hers.

"I have a bottle of white wine on ice, and some of those cherry liqueur chocolates you liked." She drew him gently towards the balcony doors leading into her living room. "I have taken the day off work, tomorrow. So I thought we could celebrate, just a little. We can go inside, where it's warm. I have the fire going."

She slanted her head. "You could read to me. Dickens, I think, would be nice."

"I have nowhere else I would rather be than with you, tonight," Vincent acknowledged her invitation, with a nod.

He lifted his shoulders. "I wonder what the year ahead will bring us..."

“Everything we could ever hope and wish for.” Catherine pushed the doors open and led the way inside.

Apart from the glow of the electric fire, the living room was also illuminated by flickering candlelight. Soft music was playing, somewhere in the shadowed background. A love song that spoke of commitment and making a future, together.

“I want you to know something.” Catherine turned back to him as they stepped down into the room. She lifted each of his hands to her lips and kissed the back of his fingers in turn.

“Without you, Vincent, I’m truly nothing. When I am with you, I’m something. But together, we are everything.”

“Everything...” Vincent whispered, drawing her close into him, once more.

And together they stood listening to the gentle strains of the music, and the words that said so much...



Chapter Two: The Return of Love



Escaping Paracelsus’ clutches had not been easy. There was so much more to be said, but too few words to express the churning of emotions they were both experiencing: the fear that they would never see each other again, and the knowledge that, if they’d been torn apart forever, they could not survive, alone.

Vincent had shielded her with his cloak, as they hurried through the choking clouds of red steam, and away from Paracelsus' suffocating lair. When they reached the lake shore, he helped her into the small, flat-bottomed skiff.

She was grateful for the warmth of his cloak, and she huddled into it, trying to keep warm, in the pervasive chill.

She looked around in amazement. It was a place she had not seen, on the way down.

Erlik, the giant follower of Paracelsus, had kept her blind, muffled and secure, in an old blanket. He'd cared little for her safety or comfort. She had the bruises to prove it.

Vincent climbed into the skiff and set off from the shore. They did not speak, as they set out across the mysterious waters that filled the amber canyon. The whole world, so far beneath the earth, looked as impossible and false as Paracelsus' dreams of renewed glory. The man's twisted genius was evidenced, all around them.

As they neared the distant shore, Vincent paused in his steady rhythm of propelling them with his long pole against the lake bed. He reached into the pocket of his quilted vest, and withdrew Catherine's crystal pendant.

To return it to her meant he was asking her to come back into his life. Begging her to accept him back, and all it entailed. It was a leap of faith, but he also knew, that without her beside him, his life would lose all meaning and purpose.

Together, we are everything, Catherine had once said to him, when he had first given her the necklace.

So, braced for whatever may come, he held it out. "I found this on my way to you." He let it dangle by its chain between them, hoping it told her of the emotions he could not bring himself to voice.

Swamped in the vastness of his cloak, Catherine looked up at him. "Oh, I thought it was gone forever!" She grasped the pendant with a grateful smile.

Her acceptance spoke through her words. She would never willingly leave him. Vincent's heart leapt with joy, even as he knew he had to speak words of caution.

He leaned closer, looking down at her with trepidation. "Catherine...on the journey, I felt for the first time, as if, somehow, you were lost to me. I knew you were in danger, and yet I could sense no fear."

Catherine watched him closely. "I was afraid, Vincent...But I couldn't allow myself to feel the fear." Her green eyes pleaded for his understanding.

You are my world, how could I even think of endangering you, my love? How could I draw you to your doom, when I knew I couldn't save you? If it must be that my life is taken instead of yours, I would chose the same path again, willingly...always...

Vincent sighed, knowing what she was thinking. It shafted through him, making him feel deeply humble. "You didn't want to draw me."

Catherine swallowed tightly. "I couldn't," she admitted, huskily. She shook her head slowly.

Vincent frowned at her, in awe of her courage. "You'd sacrifice so much..."

Catherine's tone was vehement. "I would sacrifice everything for you!" She paused, then went on. "What Paracelsus said...about your past..." Her breath hitched.

Vincent shrugged. "Before I left, Father told me something that I'm just now beginning to understand. He said that there is a truth beyond knowledge, beyond... everything we could ever hope to know."

"Yes..." Catherine smiled, and the shimmering threads of their bond began to dance anew, within Vincent's consciousness.

He knew there was no longer any room for pain or fear. Or doubt...

Vincent welcomed back the renewal of the ties that bound them, so irrevocably. He leaned closer still. "And that truth... is love..."

Catherine's smile widened, as she dipped her head in acknowledgment of what they both knew to be the ultimate truth...



Chapter Three: The Eternity of Love



Vincent carried a burning torch to the cavern's dark entrance tunnel. He stopped, and stared into the blackness, unsure if he wished to venture within. But he knew he must. He needed to discover the truth.

With a sigh, he walked carefully forward, ducking beneath several low overhangs of rock. Finally inside, he pushed the handle of his torch into a wall sconce and dropped to his knees on the ground.

Tears shimmered on his cheeks. He ignored them, as he stared at the rock walls and sandy floor.

He'd come so far, and risked everything, to return here. But it was a journey he had been compelled to make.

He leaned down to brush one hand over the sand, before picking up a handful, remembering all that he and Catherine had been to each other. His tears dripped, unheeded, onto his quilted vest.

Without you, I am nothing. With you, I am something. Together we are truly, everything, Catherine...

"Catherine..." he breathed. "Always..."

Getting to his feet again, he moved slowly across the sandy floor of the cavern, his eyes searching for any evidence of what had happened here. An event he did not remember. Even though he was well aware of the consequences of it.

Catherine had made an incredible sacrifice, on this floor. She had not hesitated. It had been an act of utter desperation, and unfathomable love...

Vincent shook his head. The memory of it remained stubbornly buried within his mind.

After long moments of seeing nothing, suddenly, he spied something, half-buried, in the sand.

He stared at the object, unable to believe his eyes. It was what he had been searching for, and had not truly expected, to find. It was a miracle it had survived.

He bent down to pick the object up, balancing its fragility across his open palm. A broken, gold chain dangled from his fingers.

It represented everything they'd ever been to each other. It had spoken once of all he could not say, or even dare to dream. It had been his gift to her, on the night of their first anniversary.

It was the necklace he'd given to Catherine. The crystal flashed in the light of his flaming torch. It felt warm to his touch. He enclosed it carefully within his fist, bringing it to his lips. He made a vow it would never be lost again.

He looked down, once more, at the sand beneath his booted feet. The very place where their son had been conceived. It was an event he, still, could not recall, and that saddened him.

Catherine had told him of the moment she'd found him, silent and lifeless, on the floor. She had crossed over into the world of the spirits to save him, drawing him back into the land of the living. And into the light of her love...

How could I forget such an event? It was such an awakening to the truth of our love, and its realities. They had loved...and there was a child...

"Jacob..." he whispered his son's name.

He raised the necklace once more to his lips, before slipping it into the pocket of his grey vest. He could not wait to get back to his chamber, and share his find with Catherine.

What had happened in this rocky chamber, on this barren floor, was a new beginning of everything. And now there were no barriers to their love, or their future, together.

They were to be married tomorrow. Three years ago, he would have sworn that such an event could not be possible, despite their hopes and dreams.

But so many things had changed, and yet a few, precious gifts had stayed the same.

Vincent hurried to take the torch, and crouched his way out of the chamber's narrow entrance. His boots knew their way home, without conscious thought. They were going back to Catherine...

The crystal had always seemed to mark their most important moments. It still reminded him of a piece of eternity. It still reminded him of the power to celebrate the darkest of times, with dancing light.

He had a gift to deliver. *Again.*

The first time she'd put it on, she was his new love. The time he'd returned it to her after Paracelsus had kidnapped her, they'd both accepted that the greatest truth was love. The next time she wore it, she would be his wife. And he loved her beyond measure...

My wife...

Vincent smiled at the thought, as his speed increased. Tomorrow night was going to be very special indeed, and this time he would remember... everything...



*"But let there be spaces in your togetherness.
And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.
Love one another but make not a bond of love.
Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls."*

Kahlil Gibran, the Prophet